

Memorial Service for John

Henry Cutler

Eulogy by David A. Mittell, Jr.

Of John Henry Cutler, it may be said what Senator Edward Kennedy said of Senator Robert Kennedy on June 8, 1968: "My brother need not be idealized or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life."

For John Cutler, as he was in the 88 years of his life, was many things: a Harvard Ph.D. in comparative literature, a teacher of Spanish at Dartmouth College, a Private in the United States Army, an officer in the United States Navy, the author of a dozen or more books, including acclaimed biographies of Governor James Michael Curley, Mayor John Francis Fitzgerald, Richard Cardinal Cushing, and Senator Edward William Brooke.

John also had a rich variety of friends, acquaintances, and correspondents—from the Irish Nationalist Eamon De Valera, to Heavyweight Champion Gene Tunney, to Neil O'Hara of the *Boston Traveler*, to Alison Arnold and George Frazier of the *Boston Herald*, to New York Mayor William O'Dwyer, to Minnesota Governor and legendary Presidential candidate Harold Stassen, to Curley and Cushing and Brooke, even unto the career criminal Caryl Chessman, late of San Quentin Prison. All of these famous friends he greeted with the same relaxed lack of pretension spiced with occasional bluntness with which he greeted you and me when we would call on him at the *Clipper* or in his book-filled living room at 53 Surplus Street.

The above cast of characters by no means constitutes a complete list of John's friends, famous or otherwise, nor in these fleeting moments do I propose to speak in detail about John's life, or even to touch on all the important things. For a more comprehensive view I suggest you hold onto a copy of the September 23 *Duxbury Clipper*, and make of it a keepsake such as Yeats describes in that wonderful poem, which goes in part:

"When you are old and gray and full of sleep, and nodding by the fire, take down this book and slowly read, and dream of the soft look your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep..."

For a full appreciation of John, I suggest you first read David's fine biography of his father, and then sometime when you have a chance, "take down" that *Clipper* and "slowly read" every word written last week by his colleagues Lindy Blaisdell, Jane Bradley, Leo Egan, Bob Hale, Mike Halloran, Paula Maxwell, Ed Perry, and Susanna Sheehan.

To honor the great trust put in me to use my best judgment in speaking of 88 years of a man's life before his family and best friends, I have approached the problem of eulogy by choosing a small number of reminiscences that are exemplary in two senses. First, I hope they reveal the man as he was, and second, that they call deserved attention to the good that he did in his life.

First and foremost, all who knew the Cutlers intimately will remember John for his great love of Bobbie, his wife of 53 years, who died in 1995. As late as 1993 and 1994, when Bobbie wasn't well—though she was heroically strong after sustaining a serious head injury in a fall—John would repeatedly say to me: "You know, Dave, I don't love Bobbie *as much* as I did when I first married her, I love her *much more!*"

So it went, and I think the same can be said of John's affection for his four surviving children, Robert, David, Meg, and Gail. Gail, who lovingly cared for both her parents at the end of their lives, reports that in the last two years John would often speak fondly of each of his children in the different roads that they have taken.

It was probably true of John, as it is of so many parents, that he was at his consistent best as a parent and as a grandparent; and it should be noted that the day before he died, his grandson Joshua Sumner Cutler lost a close election for the Massachusetts Legislature. It is in aside from the purpose of this congregation, but I hope that those of you who supported Josh will see this narrow loss after a superbly organized campaign not as a defeat, but rather as the beginning of a distinguished political career.

Nor is Josh the only grandchild of John Cutler who is going to be heard from. They are Ben, Carolyn, and Rebecca. Remember the names!

After the birth of their own children, there can be no doubt that the greatest event in the life of John and Bobbie Cutler was the founding of the *Duxbury Clipper* in 1950, which might not have happened but for badinage during a card game at the home of George and Debbie Nelson at 381 Washington St. If you go out past the Congregationalists, past the Winsor House, the next house was the Nelson's. That's where it all began!

A Wag once said that in 1950 Marshfield was marshes and fields and Duxbury was ducks and berries. That's very much an exaggeration: Both towns were vibrant communities in 1950, as they have been since before

1650. But it is quite true that with the coming of a new Route 3—the final section of which opened in 1964—there was unprecedented population growth in these parts. In the 1950s, when Route 3 was still only a blueprint, John Cutler was prescient about the changes to come and used the young *Duxbury Clipper* to articulate the need for one-acre zoning.

The issue came to a head in 1954, a year John later liked to say he didn't get invited to many cocktail parties. Duxbury was not then a predominantly wealthy town, and many people with small holdings feared that acre zoning would reduce the value of their real estate, and so opposed it. John saw it as the only practical preventative to overdevelopment. If you've been to Saquish recently, you can see what John was trying to prevent and judge for yourself if he was right or wrong.

Acre zoning passed in 1954, and to hear John tell it, the cocktail party invitations only gradually returned to normal. Twenty years later they shot down again for a different reason: Some people in town wanted two-acre zoning, and to this John was unalterably opposed. Now his prescient mind foresaw a town in which her fire fighters, her police officers, her cemetery workers, and her school teachers could no longer afford to live. Two acre zoning was defeated. Even without it, houses along Washington St. that sold for \$20,000 in 1950 are now offered at half a million or more. One must think he was right.

John wasn't always right, of course, but right or wrong, his great love of his adopted town led him to an impeccable intellectual integrity. For nigh on 50 years, he articulated what he believed to be best for the town. I would not say he did this without any fear of the consequences for himself, for by dint of both his social background and his emotional nature, disapprobation could sting him deeply. His achievement, rather, was one of overcoming fear: He always articulated what he thought was best for the town without *regard* for the consequences to himself.

The anecdote about John's cocktail party invitations taking a long time to return to their all-time highs after occasional deep corrections elucidates one of John's truly wonderful qualities: Unlike some of his critics, he didn't carry grudges at all. He could be irascible and unrelenting when he disagreed with you, and no doubt many in this congregation have had run-ins with him. But in both public affairs and private relations he was the first one to forgive and forget. I got along famously with John for 41 years except for one day, and the story of that day will illustrate the kindness and generosity buried deep in his heart.

I first became friends with all the Cutlers, but especially with David, during a marathon two-day tennis match when we were 13. David and I were vying for the right to play on Jack Barnaby's under-16 team at the Duxbury Yacht Club, which competed against teams from other South Shore towns.

Robert and Gail were the real athletes in the Cutler family. We must remember that when Gail was 13, she was competing on the national badminton circuit, and Robert is an excellent tennis player. I knew I couldn't beat him, but I wasn't the least bit concerned about playing David.

In the event, he won the first set 12-10, I won the second set 7-5, and 42 years later I still get reminded about once a month just who won the third set and the match. That's friendship.

By 1961 David and I and Freddy Stetson—who is here today from northern Vermont—were not only best friends, even then we were old friends. That summer we were 18 and all our girlfriends were having their coming out parties. "Coming out" is a term that had not yet taken on another air. A "coming out party" was simply a chance to kick up your heels and dance up a storm. Perhaps against her sweet and modest will, Meg was about to have her coming out party at the Harvard Club, and with an unprincipled assertion of gender equality, David and Fred and I decided we'd throw our coming out party for ourselves. My parents, in one of their more pixillated moments, allowed as how we might roll up the rug in *their* living room and have all our friends over.

David's job was to bring the potato chips and the Coke—another word that had a more innocent meaning then. At 8:00 the guests were arriving, but there was no sign of David. So I gave him a call. "I can't come," he said, "My father has some things for me to do around the house!"

"Oh, for Gawd sake," says I, "Why does your stupid old man have to do these things?"

Unfortunately, Mr. Cutler had picked up the phone in the other room and had heard everything. "Young

man, you are never to communicate with anyone in this family again," he bellowed before hanging up.

David was very upset—almost in tears. "Why'd you have to call him 'stupid,'" he said. "He's much smarter than you are!" True enough.

This was the August the Berlin Wall went up, and it seemed a Duxbury wall was going up, too. But whereas the Berlin Wall lasted 28 years, the Duxbury wall held for about 18 hours. The next afternoon Bobbie called and said, "Dave, Mr. Cutler wonders if you could come over and have a chat with him."

I guessed I could squeeze it in, and ten minutes later I was standing at the entrance to the Cutlers' dining room where the *Clipper* was folded every week, and where John did most of his writing and editing. "Hello, Mr. Cutler," I said.

"No, Dave Mittell," he said. "From now on you're going to call me John. Just go right back out and come in again and this time said, 'Hello, John.'"

I did what he told me, and this time I said, "Hello, Mr. John Cutler."

"No, no," he said. "Come in here, Bobbie. From now on Dave Mittell is to call us 'John and Bobbie,' and you're to make sure he never forgets it!"

So it went. This man of a Churchillian memory for facts and names and quotations and anecdotes, this man who was lightening quick to get annoyed, and almost as quick to get angry, was quickest of all to forgive and forget a trespass against him by an impudent brat such as I.

A generous and principled forgetting was as true of the public man as of the private one. The best illustration of that is probably the often-recounted Paul Barber story. I didn't look it up, but to the best of my recollection, Paul Barber was first elected a Duxbury selectmen in 1969, when he had the support of the Republican and Democratic town committees, as well as of the *Clipper*.

But, fairly or unfairly, by the mid-1970s John had come to the conclusion that Barber had outlived his usefulness as a public official. He may have come to that opinion gradually or instantaneously—he was capable of both. But once he had made up his mind, he was relentless in hounding Paul Barber, whose alleged arrogance he compared to Louis XIV.

After a couple of years of this, Paul was defeated for re-election and the feud broken off. Then, in 1980, Paul announced that he would run for the state Senate. Shortly thereafter, I was sitting in the Cutlers' living room one afternoon when the late Nat Pierce dropped by. "Well, John," said Nat, "I guess you're going to have Paul Barber to kick around some more."

"No, Nat," John told him. "I opposed Paul Barber as a Selectman because I thought he was doing things that were bad for Duxbury. But he's a fine man and would make an excellent Senator. Why, I intend to support him!" And he did.

That was John Cutler at his best: doing what he thought was best for Duxbury in the moment, every moment, for 48 years. It was a crusade, really, during which he didn't dislike anyone for long with the single exception of "nice people" who hid behind high fences and didn't get involved in the town.

Later in life John would lose a son, he would lose his wife, he would lose his eyesight, but he never lost his critical faculty or his ability to stir the town. As late as the 1990s a group of his critics at the coffee shop in Hall's Corner were talking about starting a new newspaper in town to answer the *Clipper*. It was to be named the *Duxbury Frigate*. It may not have been a serious plan, I don't think it really was. But what a lovely name, and what a lovely tribute to John and Bobbie's *Duxbury Clipper*.

In a little while this congregation is going to disperse, and each of us must either turn south on Washington St. and head toward the flag pole at Hall's Corner or turn north on Washington St. toward the flag pole at Bluefish River. Whichever way you go you will see a village that is, if anything, *more* beautiful than it was in 1950. And so most of the rest of the town. In all America, how many cities, how many towns, how many hamlets of any size can say that? Very, very few.

As you drive along Washington St. after you leave here, I urge you to drive slowly, for there are constables. More importantly, there are children. Moreover, if you drive slowly, the late 18th century hip-roofed captains' houses will meet your eye, as will the early 19th century Greek Revival farmhouses, with their gable end facing the street. Consider that almost every one of these is as prim and as pretty as it has been at any time in the history of the town.

Consider that, and remember John Henry Cutler. He stood up for Duxbury.